

## How can false or irrational beliefs be useful?

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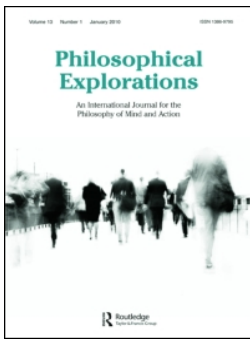
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## INTRODUCTION

### How can false or irrational beliefs be useful?

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For this special issue we asked leading epistemologists and philosophers of mind to bring together their different perspectives on what it is for a false or irrational belief to be useful. It is no surprise that false or irrational beliefs can be biologically adaptive by furthering survival and reproduction, and psychologically adaptive by enhancing self-esteem and well-being. The research questions driving our project are: (1) whether false or irrational beliefs can have epistemic benefits; (2) how such benefits interact with biological and psychological benefits; and (3) how considerations about the utility of false or irrational beliefs affect our conception of what a belief does or should aim for, or how to best promote the epistemic standing of a real-life agent.

The varied and thorough contributions to this special issue make progress with respect to all three issues. Some contributors focus on the nature of the benefits that false or irrational beliefs may have. Can false or irrational beliefs have epistemic benefits despite being epistemically faulty? Can some false or irrational beliefs be necessary for successful agency, by enhancing the agent's motivation to pursue her goals, or by directly promoting the fulfilment of such goals? Other contributors reflect on the implications of recognizing such benefits for our concept of belief, truth, or rationality. How does the acknowledgement that false or irrational beliefs can be useful impact on the debate about the aims and norms of belief? Is it always preferable to have true rather than false beliefs if false beliefs can have benefits?

Duncan Pritchard opens the special issue with his paper “Epistemically Useful False Beliefs.” He is interested in evaluating the claim that there is a set of false but useful beliefs, which are appropriately classified as such on the grounds of *epistemic* usefulness. He considers three candidate cases which might be thought to result in false but epistemically useful beliefs: scientific fictions, epistemic situationism embedded within virtue epistemology, and hinge commitments. He argues that merely *accepting* scientific fictions is sufficient to reap the epistemic benefits, and so there are no epistemically beneficial false *beliefs* to be found here. With respect to the challenge posed by certain kinds of epistemic situationism, once again, Pritchard suggests that it is difficult to describe the nature of such cases by appeal to *belief*. Finally, on hinge commitments, Pritchard argues that though there is epistemic utility, there are, as with the previous two cases, no *beliefs* here. Pritchard

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concludes that, at the very least, we should be suspicious of the claim that there are a philosophically significant class of epistemically useful false *beliefs*.

In “*Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc: Some Benefits of Rationalization*,” Jesse Summers asks what the benefits of sincere rationalization are. He argues that rationalizing has two broad kinds of benefit. First, it enables us to identify good reasons to act given the pressure of rational consistency. Second, it also acts as a prompt for us to impose meaningful patterns on what are, in fact, merely permissible options. He concludes with a note of caution: although he has identified two potential benefits of sincere rationalization, he doubts that it is as worthwhile as the alternative, modest and incomplete self-understanding. Though these benefits then may not be worth the costs, Summers aims at shedding light on what it means for us to act on *what we take to be* good reasons.

In his contribution, “Do Religious ‘Beliefs’ Respond to Evidence?,” Neil Van Leeuwen focuses on the epistemic status of religious attitudes. At the outset, he identifies a puzzle surrounding religious attitudes: some examples of religious ‘beliefs’ *seem* to be responsive to evidence, whereas some *seem* to be completely unresponsive. Van Leeuwen seeks to reconcile this puzzle about the nature of religious attitudes by invoking the concept of pretense. He argues that religious attitudes are *not* responsive to evidence, but, to accommodate the cases in which they appear to be responsive to evidence, he appeals to Kendall Walton’s theory of make-believe. Specifically, when these attitudes seem to be responsive to evidence it is because people with those attitudes are engaging in what Van Leeuwen calls *The Evidence Game*.

In “On the Special Insult of Refusing Testimony,” Allan Hazlett is interested in the claim that one can insult another by refusing her testimony. This is because, argues Hazlett, in so doing one manifests doubt regarding the testifier’s credibility. Towards the end of the paper, Hazlett identifies three applications of his conclusion. First, and most pertinent to the theme of the special issue, believing someone’s testimony in some cases can represent a pro tanto good, *even when that testimony is false*. Second, refusing someone’s testimony can be a way of *insulting* the testifier. And third, in cases where we recognize that refusing testimony can amount to insulting the testifier, one’s desire to avoid this consequence can dispose one to believe the testimony. In such cases, Hazlett argues, the belief *even if true*, cannot amount to knowledge.

Katherine Puddifoot is interested in the epistemic costs and benefits of implicit bias and automatic stereotyping in her paper “Dissolving the Epistemic/Ethical Dilemma over Implicit Bias.” The dilemma is one of different demands coming from the ethical and epistemic domains. On the one hand, we ought to respond to people equally, and on the other, we ought to respond to people in a way which reflects how things are, and thus consider that members of certain social groups are statistically more likely to possess certain traits than members of other social groups. Puddifoot argues that, in fact, the putative dilemma offers a false dichotomy, since failing to reflect social realities is the best course of action *from an epistemic point of view* and also *from an ethical point of view*. She appeals to the notion of *epistemic innocence* to capture the epistemic status of automatic stereotyping.

In her paper “Biological Function and Epistemic Normativity,” Ema Sullivan-Bissett is interested in giving a biological account of epistemic normativity. She begins by positing two biological functions proper to our mechanisms of belief production: the production of *true* beliefs (*proper function one*), and the production of *useful* beliefs (*proper function two*). She argues that this model of belief can explain epistemic normativity understood as the claim that (1) belief has truth as its standard of correctness and (2) there are *sui generis* categorical epistemic norms. The only sense in which true beliefs are correct is given by appeal to proper function one, and the putative *sui generis* epistemic norms are reduced

to doxastic strategies which facilitate the meeting of belief's biologically grounded standard of correctness. She gives an error account of the mistakes we make in our epistemic discourse, which goes via the claim that the beliefs which make up our epistemic discourse are produced by mechanisms performing proper function two: the production of *useful* beliefs. She concludes with the claim that her biological model of belief has the resources to accommodate belief's standard of correctness and our epistemic practice.

In "Aiming at Truth and Aiming at Success," Lubomira Radoilska focuses on the relationship between norms of belief and norms of action. She identifies a challenge posed by positive illusions, namely that in such cases to adhere to the norms of belief and to adhere to the norms of action is to be pulled in opposing directions. In response to this challenge Radoilska argues that the pursuits of aiming at the truth and aiming at success are fully compatible. This compatibility is hypothesized to be in virtue of the link between these two pursuits, specifically, that it is normatively appropriate to satisfy the norm of truth in virtue of satisfying the success norm of action, and vice versa. Radoilska takes her picture to be appealing in so far as it can explain away putative instances of satisfying the success norm of action *at the expense of* the truth norm of belief.

In the final paper of the issue, "Rational Hope," Miriam McCormick distinguishes between rational and irrational hope. She argues that when assessing the rationality of hope, we need to appeal to both theoretical considerations (whether the belief that the hope entails is justified) and practical considerations (whether the hope contributes to the agent's flourishing). McCormick identifies a tendency among philosophers to understand mental states in either strictly cognitive, or strictly conative terms. She suggests that hope represents a state which cannot so easily be captured by this kind of framework. Instead, a model of hope should not have it that the norms in play are either exclusively theoretical or exclusively practical, and indeed, reflection on the nature of hope and the norms which govern it may well put pressure on the supposed sharp distinction between cognitive and conative states.

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### Notes on contributors

Lisa Bortolotti is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Birmingham. Her work is primarily in the philosophy of psychology and psychiatry, and she is especially interested in beliefs, rationality, and memory. Her latest book is *Irrationality* (Polity Press 2014).

Ema Sullivan-Bissett is a Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Birmingham. Her research concerns the nature of belief and its connection to truth, as well as delusional beliefs and how they are formed.